Developing reading in modern foreign languages: Case studies from the classroom

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Abstract

Reading in a modern foreign language is not an easy task. In the most recent programme of study (DfE, 2013), students at Key Stage 3 are required to develop – amongst many other skills – reading. Desired skills include comprehension of original passages, from a range of different sources, with the view to not only understand the ideas communicated but also be able to translate them in accurate English. Furthermore, literary texts are to be used to "stimulate ideas" and develop "creative expression" (DfE, 2013, p. 1) with the aim to "expand understanding of the language and culture". Within this context, the article aims to discuss the need that teachers face to develop reading in their classrooms and how it can be achieved. As with every other skill – listening, writing, speaking – it is important to nurture reading from a very early stage of learning. The case studies will demonstrate the possibility and accessibility of longer passages at an early stage of learning and will exemplify how to move the students away from rote learning and memorisation of vocabulary. Case studies will also show how reading can lead towards the development of other skills such as speaking, listening and writing.

Introduction

Reading in a foreign language is not an easy task. Within the context of the National Curriculum in England where this article is initially situated, the most recent programme of study for schools (DfE, 2013) requires students at Key Stage 3 (KS3) (11-13 years old) to develop – amongst many other skills – reading. Desired skills include comprehension of original passages, from a range of different sources, with the view to not only understand the ideas communicated but also be able to translate them in accurate English. Literary texts are to be used to "stimulate ideas" and develop "creative expression" (DfE, 2013, p. 1) with the aim to "expand understanding of the language and culture".

Teachers face the challenge to develop reading (amongst other skills) with the view to help the learners develop linguistically in their second language (L2). Researchers such as Wilson, Carroll and Werno (2014) have argued that "reading in a second or foreign language (L2) can be considered to be similar to reading in the first language (L1) except that L2 learners may be inhibited by a lack of linguistic knowledge" (Wilson et al., 2014, p. 5). This article argues that reading in a foreign language is far more complex than reading in L1 because it is difficult for the learners to draw from different types of knowledge: semantic, syntactic and graphophonic (Goodman, 1967). Semantic knowledge is our knowledge of the world which helps us make predictions of what we read, for instance, Goodman's example (1967): 'The sun rises in the east and sets in the ....' We know the answer is 'west' because our knowledge of the world helps us make that prediction. In a foreign language classroom and depending on age and knowledge, students can possibly draw from this type of knowledge that will aid them in deciphering what they are trying to read in a foreign language. However, it can be argued that it is not always certain that young learners will have this type of knowledge developed to the degree required to help them make the right predictions.

Syntactic knowledge is the knowledge we have of the structure of the language, similarly to Goodman's example: 'This flower is a volter. This is another volter. There are two............' – our knowledge of the structure of the language and in this case the plural form 's' will help complete the sentence 'there are two volters'. 'Volters' is a made up word and therefore we cannot use our knowledge of the world (the semantic knowledge) to resolve this. This example illustrates that students will eventually find the answer in L2 only by using this type of knowledge without necessarily demonstrating that they understand what is written.

Graphophonic knowledge is the knowledge of sound-letter relationships, for example: 'The flag is red, white and y.......' the graphophonic knowledge with the letter 'y' as a clue is guiding the reader here to predict the word 'yellow'. Similarly, this type of knowledge does not prove that the reader has understood what is written, the reader uses the graphophonic knowledge to predict the word.

All three types of knowledge illustrate that there is a way to decipher the words in each case and fulfil a reading task in a classroom as required, but it does not mean that learners can necessarily make sense of what is written. In order to make sense of what we read it is not enough to know only the words, as words themselves do not carry meaning, the meaning lies with the reader and what the reader brings to them. Essentially, we construct meaning by reference to what we already know and in a language classroom knowledge is generally transmitted or facilitated by the teacher. So students rely a lot on what knowledge they construct within the classroom, with their teacher. This can have its limitations, due to the frequency of exposure, pedagogical practices and stage in their schooling.

Attempting to compare reading processes between L1 and L2, all three types of knowledge discussed above are used simultaneously by readers in L1. What needs to be considered is that foreign language learners will not be able to use all these types of knowledge simultaneously and accurately in the classroom because it depends on what they are exposed to during the teaching process and how much they know about the topic taught. They rely effectively a lot on what the teacher brings into the classroom. Also, if students are unable or not ready to bring enough personal knowledge of a topic to a text, they are effectively robbed of the ability to make use of a key resource for reading: what they already know. This has considerable implications for foreign language learners who may not have any or very little cultural or world knowledge of the language they are studying. This leads us to one conclusion: we need to teach reading and develop reading strategies in order to facilitate learning and encourage students that reading in a foreign language is achievable and eventually enjoyable.

Theoretical and contextual framework

Cummins (2008), Luke and Freebody (1999) and Scarborough (2001) suggest three gradual processes that take place during reading: learners go through the steps of word recognition, leading up to language comprehension and eventually to text interpretation.

When first learning a foreign language what can be a great challenge is to move beyond the word level, phonological decoding and sight-reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990; Joshi & Aaron, 2000; McBridie-Chang & Kail, 2002; Ziegler & Goswami, 2005). From personal experience as an educator and observing numerous student teachers in secondary schools annually, I see a lot of teaching of vocabulary items in isolation. Most of the teaching time is spent developing a bank of lexis on different topics, where very rarely this is applied in context and as part of a paragraph or a longer passage. Teachers are hesitant to move the students on from topic-based vocabulary input to including those words or chunks of language within a paragraph or a longer text. The goal of a lesson is generally to understand one or more regurgitated sentences. Basic language comprehension therefore becomes the ultimate goal and the process of personal interpretation is interrupted, robbing the students of the possibility to move beyond the 'form'. "Form as in lexicon: 'lexical categories' and 'functional categories'. 'Lexical categories' mean words such as verbs, nouns and more 'functional categories' of those words such as tenses and auxiliaries" (Mitchel & Myles, 2004, p. 54). Essentially

robbing them of the possibility to engage more creatively with a text and make it their own.

In order to aid towards a successful comprehension of a text, a set of cognitive and essentially metacognitive reading strategies is required during the teaching process. Reading strategies are defined as 'controlled actions' by a reader and are directed towards a reading goal (Afflerbach, Pearson & Paris, 2008). 'Cognitive' strategies are defined as "a group of mental processes that includes attention, memory, producing and understanding language, solving problems, and making decisions" (CILT, 2004, p. 17) whereas 'metacognitive' strategies refer to "learners' automatic awareness of their own knowledge and their ability to understand, control, and manipulate their own cognitive processes" (CILT, 2004, p. 18). In practice, it means that teachers can instil certain techniques and specific actions to their learners in order to favour language comprehension (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992) and allow their learners to earn their autonomy in planning, evaluating and monitoring their own strategy use (Macaro & Erler, 2008). Bottom- up strategies that focus on the words on the page include, "sounding out words to discover the meaning, looking up for cognates" (Woore, 2014, p. 88), making vocabulary lists and colour coding words. Top-down strategies "draw upon the knowledge the reader brings to the text. E.g. making inferences using background knowledge" (Woore, 2014, p. 88). The latter is much more challenging for it to happen in the classroom as it depends on how much background knowledge the learners have been exposed to during teaching. This is often the stumbling point that does not allow students to go beyond the form. There is limited background knowledge that they can bring to a text and therefore make sense of it. A lot of emphasis is put on the decoding and graphophonic knowledge and students tend to focus on how they pronounce or decipher the words with little encouragement to go beyond what they do not know. Building the confidence around reading and tackling longer texts comes from the teaching of reading strategies on how to focus on the context and what the students already know. Equally, consistent exposure to texts from early on in their schooling, where they see the words taught in context, will allow them to gradually gain the confidence to read longer passages and not get overwhelmed, when they try to spot one word they might know within a longer passage. A comparative study organised by Macaro and Erler (2008) where they evaluated a programme of reading instruction with a sample of 116 learners from six secondary schools, found that the participants who benefited from reading instruction – in other words the group of participants who were taught on how to read in a foreign language through the use of reading strategies – became more likely to engage actively with the text, whereas the group of students who did not receive any reading instruction became less likely over time (Woore, 2014).

Case study

Based on the theoretical and contextual framework discussed above, I will attempt to illustrate how the three stages of word recognition, comprehension and eventually interpretation are addressed via the literature project, that runs on the course I am part of, the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) languages course at the UCL Institute of Education, London UK. A postgraduate teacher education course and a qualification required to teach in the UK. The project was initiated back in 2014 as a response to the new programme of study for languages that was published at the time and with the view to respond creatively to the challenges the new programme i.e include literary texts from KS3. It has since become an annual project and an integral part of our course to this day. As a PGCE team, we submitted a bid to the British Academy at the time with the project 'London partnership launches literature' and we won one of the Awards for the innovative nature of the project, direct impact on our partnership schools and for its durability and sustainably. In practice, what the project means is that "student teachers work in collaboration with experienced teachers and mentors in school to develop innovative ways to respond to the challenges of the new curriculum and inspire creative responses from pupils" (Diamantidaki, 2016, p. 59). The aim is to work with literary texts and make them accessible to KS3 learners. Following on input from university lectures and workshops over a period of time, "student teachers develop resources and approaches for integrating literature into a topic-based approach to promote language skills and cultural understanding" (Diamantidaki, 2016, p. 59). The languages involved are French, Spanish, German, Russian, Italian and Mandarin.

The project consists of seven steps as follows:

- Identify an appropriate literary text for use with a KS3 class.
- Plan a sequence of engaging target language (TL) activities (no more than a sequence of two lessons) to accompany the text and meet the programme of study requirement. The text had to link to a topic in the scheme of work and could serve either as an introduction to the topic or as a springboard to more creative work.
- Produce a short-term plan, lessons plans and resources. Submit these to the mentor for discussion and possible development and improvement.
- Teach the lessons incorporating the literary texts, observed by the mentor and/or UCL IOE tutor. Meet with the mentor for feedback. Write up what worked well and outline areas for improvement (200 words).
- Upload their two-lesson sequence with the evaluations on Moodle (a virtual learning environment) before the end of their second school placement.
- Once at university, work in groups of three based on one element their work had in common: either the topic they taught or the type of literary text chosen for instance.
- In a workshop on literature and ICT, combine resources with other student teachers and create posters.

That last phase of the project allows for a creation of multicultural and multilingual posters since students across languages can group according to a common element. Every year some 25 posters in A1 format are printed and

presented at the annual literature poster conference held the end of the PGCE course; a celebratory moment of creativity where school mentors are invited and all the resources shared amongst the participants for future use in school. All students sign an ethics form prior to conducting the project in schools and a letter to give or not consent for their resources to be shared anonymously.

Student teachers have the opportunity to present their work to their peers, tutors and subject mentors and discuss the outcomes, allowing for an exchange of ideas and experiences. The event involves a debate between a panel of student teachers representing different languages and university lecturers in which participants share their opinions, reactions and the challenges they faced teaching language through literature. From the annual literary project I would like to illustrate three case studies on how the stages of word recognition, text comprehension and text interpretation have been addressed during the reading of a literary text. I shall discuss the pedagogical processes followed and how the literary text helped build the confidence of the students. This is based on the teaching resources and lesson evaluations that student- teachers submitted online, in our virtual learning environment called Moodle.

Case study 1

Word Cognition

'The year 8 second language students had already done the past tense with avoir and so had a foundation on which to build their understanding of the passé composé with être. The starter was a revision of what we had already done with avoir as a quick reminder. I handed out the poem and they played Ping Pong with it. I then asked them to find the passé composé and spot the difference between the avoir (highlighted in blue) and être (highlighted in green). We then made this rule explicit and started to translate. Each group of 2-3 had 2-3 lines to translate. Once this had been shared, we then performed the poem in the same groups. Acting the poem out made them realise that the être was used for movement, I then elicited this rule and played a translation morpion to finish.

Déjeuner du Matin was a very useful poem for teaching the past tense. The learners were encouraged to notice grammatical rules following Schmidt's theory of noticing. These rules were then made explicit. Acting out the poem was particularly useful as the kinaesthetic problem solving was what had prompted them to notice the movement rule. Overall it was a successful grammar lesson with very little TTT [test, teach, test]. If I were to repeat this lesson in the future, I might split it over two lessons to allow more time for performance as they really enjoyed this.'

The lesson evaluation above discusses how the literary text was used as a means for the students to notice the grammatical rules of the past tense in French. This is a class of students aged between 11-12 years old and it is their second year of learning French. Prior to giving the poem out, the teacher taught the words/structures and revised them as a starter. The poem was used pedagogically to promote repetition. Ping pong is a game where students read aloud to each other taking turns for each verse. The particular poem chosen has a lot of repetitive structures in the past French tense and each verse is very short making it easy for learners to read it. Spotting the structures of how the past tense is formed and colour coding those, allows the students to recognise the words/structures and initially engage with the 'form' within the poem. This is also an example of the deductive approach as explained by Vogel, Herron, Cole and York (2011) where the students notice the grammar in a text first followed by an explicit explanation of the rule. The students then attempt to translate the poem where they slowly move into the comprehension phase. What is important to notice during the teaching process is that the students eventually performed the poem – they acted it out - with an implicit teacher objective for the students to understand the concept of 'movement verbs' in French. This is an excellent example of students developing confidence tackling a literary text (a poem in this case) where they could see language and words they already know in a real authentic document that they can understand and make it their own.

Case study 2

Text comprehension

'I chose 'Little Red Riding Hood' to complete the literature project with a year 9 class as the students were studying their childhood in German that term and the use of a fairy tale fit in well with the unit of work. It was also a good opportunity to work on the imperfect tense as this was a grammar point the students had covered in their German lessons and one with which they continued to have difficulty.

The students engaged well with the text as it was familiar to them and they were able to understand most of what was happening because of that. They worked well with the imperfect tense and could correctly underline it in the text when asked to do so. They were also able to use their textual analysis skills to summarise each paragraph once we had read it together.'

One reading strategy that was used to develop understanding beyond the noticing and colour coding was to read the text together with the teacher and then allow them to work in groups to produce a summary. This allows for collaboration and differentiated approaches to produce the summary expected. Students discuss and negotiate the meaning and that brings immense confidence to be able to this with a text in the foreign language. Another added variable that aids comprehension is the prior knowledge of the fairy tale. That allows the students to put the semantic knowledge in motion and actively used it in this case to help them make those syntactic and graphophonic links which allow them eventually to make sense of the text.

Case study 3

Text interpretation

'For my literature project, I decided to use a song called "Bonito" by the band, "Jarabe de Palo" as I thought it would be an engaging and accessible way to explore a piece of literature

through lyrics and music. I created a two-part lesson plan, with a booklet that the students could use over the two lessons and PowerPoints to aid the lessons. I did it with a year 8 group who generally have a very high level and enjoy learning new vocabulary, expressions and phrases. It also linked in with these students learning how to use different tenses together.

The two lessons went well, and the students showed enthusiasm and interest in the song and the lyrics. They were guided through the text by first looking at the difference between 'bonito' and 'bonita', then moving on to learning key vocabulary, then exploring areas of grammar that the song includes and finally producing some of their own lyrics based on the original ones. The students enjoyed exploring literature which was distinct from what they usually do in classes and they began to be creative with the new elements of language that they were learning. The students will be performing the song as part of my Film Project and this may be another reason why they were motivated to learn and enjoy the song as they are excited about this.'

'The gradual approach to the text aroused curiosity in pupils. The fact that it was a song with an enticing rhythm and children chorus meant that pupils 'embraced' the difference fairly easily, and lent an interested ear. The various tasks I created around the song (predictions, research on El Salvador, word based research, listening, translation, singing) meant a gradual understanding and 'owning' of the song from pupils. The pupils particularly enjoyed the word hunt, fill in the blanks and singing. The quieter pupils enjoyed the translations and other written activity. The project helped me cater to a range of learning styles and also connect with the class at a different levels. It was interesting to see that the usually more disruptive boys enjoyed singing the most, showing less inhibitions than other pupils. This allowed me to reward and praise them. I also think the project enabled a slightly less formal way of teaching and learning which we all enjoyed.'

The creative expression of the students and the connection that is developed between student and teacher as illustrated via the examples above are the very encouraging part of the teaching process. When students are given the possibility and the gradual confidence to create their own versions – to act or adapt their interpretations according to their own learning style they start enjoying the learning and the emotional and motivational rewards are far more rewarding.

Conclusion

When students engage with texts - in this case with literary texts - they go beyond the educative linguistic process. The examples above demonstrate that once students are involved in creative outputs, it has a considerable impact on self-esteem in the target language and a catalyst for intrinsic motivation. The latter is illustrated above with the 'naughty boys' having been the more vocal ones. Heilbronn (2019, p. 21) argues that "through discussing events, ideas and characters'" actions and motivation, students enter a world of moral ambiguity that, paradoxically in a discussion about fiction, is actually a real-life experience of ambiguity. Literature matters and teaching it is important because only

with this sympathetic understanding can people develop the kinds of openness to others which are required in a democratic society. A foreign language classroom becomes then more than just another classroom where knowledge is transmitted and shared, it prepares students for tackling real-life problems where they would not have all the solutions in hand, where they would need to think, question and negotiate. Developing reading in the classroom becomes something more than just a skill, it becomes a necessity and an undeniable reality.

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